

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 505

UD 031 671

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TITLE Making the Case: Measuring the Impact of Youth Development Programs.
INSTITUTION Search Inst., Minneapolis, MN.
REPORT NO ISBN-1-57482-721-9
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 33p.; Commissioned by the YMCA of the USA.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Child Development; Children; Educational Policy; Evaluation Methods; Policy Formation; Program Development; Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; Self Esteem; *Urban Youth; *Youth Programs

IDENTIFIERS Impact Evaluation; Youth Development Model

ABSTRACT

This report provides program funders and providers with an overview of what children and adolescents need to be successful and grow up healthy, and it examines the role of youth programs in healthy development. It presents a review of effective programming, the relevant literature on youth outcomes, and ideas and suggestions for evaluating programs in manageable and affordable ways. Traditionally, policy makers, funders, and program planners have considered the role and impact of youth programs from a problem-focused perspective. However, those who work with young people are increasingly recognizing the power of an alternative approach that focuses on promoting the positive. The work of the Search Institute, Minneapolis (Minnesota) has focused on developmental assets, things that young people need in their lives in order to thrive. The asset-building approach demonstrates that supportive and empowering relationships with peers, parents, and other adults tend to protect youth from high-risk behaviors. A growing body of evidence supports the value of participation in youth programs and a list of 14 characteristics of effective programs produced by the Search Institute. Many types of youth programs have been developed, from recreational to career-planning programs, but many have the common goal of increasing self-esteem, a key ingredient of the well-being of children and adolescents. Recommendations are made for program accountability and program development for local and national organizations. (Contains five figures.) (SLD)

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A Search Institute Report



MAKING THE CASE:

ED 406 505

Measuring the Impact of Youth Development Programs



By Nancy Leffert, Ph.D., Rebecca N. Saito,
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About This Project

This report was prepared by Search Institute in cooperation with the YMCA of the USA. Special thanks to Myrtis Meyer and Mary Pyke-Gover of the YMCA for their support in its development.

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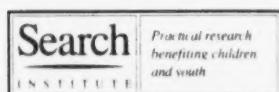
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ISBN: 1-57482-721-9

Credits

Design: Wendy J. Johnson, Points Of View, Inc.
Editor: Jennifer Griffin-Wiesner

Printed on recycled paper in the United States of America



Introduction

Recently, many local and national funders have charged youth-serving agencies to develop methods of evaluating their programs that document the positive benefits and impacts of program participation on youth. While many funders understand the limitations, they also want to ensure that the programs they support are making a difference in the lives of young people.

Therefore, they usually require program providers to clearly demonstrate several indicators of why their program should receive funding: their youth development goals and/or outcomes and how their program will facilitate them; related research and/or program evaluations that demonstrate that their type of program can and will make a difference; evidence that their program has “what it takes” to be a good program; and—eventually—evidence of some positive impact on the lives of the young people involved.

This report provides program providers and funders with an overview of what children and adolescents need to be successful and grow up healthy, and examines the role of youth programs in healthy development. It presents a review of effective programming, the relevant literature on youth outcomes, and ideas and suggestions for evaluating programs in manageable and affordable ways that meet the needs of both funders and program providers.

Specifically, it reviews and synthesizes the literature in the field to:

- Determine commonly held goals and desired youth outcomes across local youth development programs
- Document youth outcomes from various types of programs
- Create a framework for thinking about the relationship between program goals and various youth outcomes





A Framework for Understanding Youth Outcomes

Children and youth have four basic developmental needs:

- food and shelter
- supportive, caring relationships
- safe places
- opportunities for growth

Specific needs in these four areas vary among individuals and are influenced by young people's physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development, as well as unique characteristics, history, and current life situations.

Methods

This report grows out of Search Institute's work on behalf of the YMCA of the USA to develop a process that helps local agencies respond to the requests of funders, as well as gather information about "what works and what doesn't," that can help strengthen the programs they offer for young people.

The literature review conducted for this report included a computerized search of both PSYCHLIT and ERIC databases, restricted to the English language and producing approximately 150 possible resources. Studies included focused on outcomes of youth involvement in various types of programs that were suitable for comparison and generalization. Many of the studies reviewed were program evaluations, and did not allow for reliable comparisons with other studies. However, program evaluations often report on many of the outcomes of interest, and to the extent possible and where appropriate, these are also included. Relevant empirical studies of youth development programs were also included.

The places, opportunities, and relationships that young people experience in their families, schools, communities, youth programs, and religious congregations provide the foundation on which youth develop. If these settings support and stimulate development, as well as provide appropriate boundaries and limitations, children and youth will most likely grow into healthy and productive adults. When youth don't experience positive, supportive relationships, places, and opportunities, the chances increase that they will get involved with health compromising behaviors such as alcohol and other drug use, school problems, and violence.

Figure 1 illustrates the various influences upon a young person's life and how they work together to shape choices and behaviors—both positive and negative.

The model described in Figure 1 is dynamic. Outcomes at one point in time may affect a young person's development at a later point. For example, a child whose developmental needs are consistently met has a positive foundation for becoming a healthy adolescent.

Early adolescence is a time of rapid change in young people's development and developmental needs. Therefore it is believed to represent the last best chance to have a positive impact upon the development of youth. High-quality youth development programs at this age, can significantly influence the decisions young people make and the paths they choose.

This framework is key in understanding the important roles youth development programs can play in a young person's life. The availability of youth programs, as well as their use, is important to the overall health of young people in a community. One characteristic that most distinguishes healthy communities from less healthy communities is the percentage of youth who are engaged in some form of positive youth activities.¹

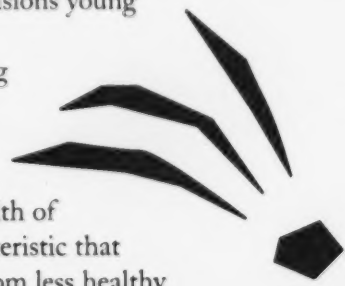
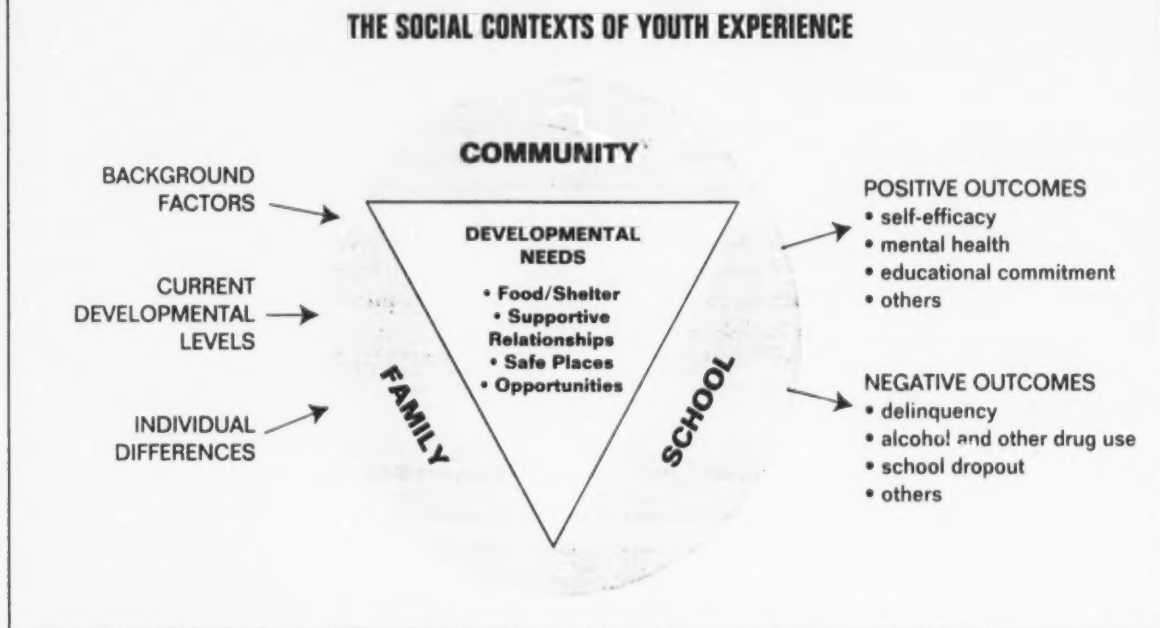


Figure 1
A Framework for Understanding Youth Outcomes in the Context of Development



From Problem-Focused to Positive Youth Development

Traditionally, policy-makers, funders, and program planners have considered the role and impact of youth programs from a problem-focused perspective. A specific problem is targeted (for example, violence, school drop-out rates, pregnancy, alcohol use) and programs and other strategies are developed to fix the problem. However, as youth development expert Karen Pittman has suggested, "problem-free is not fully prepared."² We need to move beyond the problem-focused paradigm that tries to reduce or control negative behavior through prevention, early interventions, and treatment and/or incarceration when the problems become severe. Although there will always be a need for these types of services, those who work with and care about young people are recognizing the power of an alternative approach, one which focuses on promoting the positive. Search Institute's asset-building framework is an example of this positive approach (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
What's Different About Asset Building?

An asset-building perspective transforms the way communities address youth issues and think about youth. Some of the differences are:

COMMON APPROACHES TO YOUTH ISSUES	AN ASSET-BUILDING APPROACH
Focusing on problems	Focusing on the positive
Pointing fingers and assigning blame	Taking personal responsibility for making a difference
Reactive	Proactive
Heavy reliance on professionals	Mobilizing the public as well as all youth-serving organizations in a community
Viewing youth as problems	Viewing youth as resources
A crisis-management mentality	A vision-building perspective
Competition among sectors and service providers	Cooperation within the community
Heavy reliance on public funding to provide services	Unleashing the caring potential of all residents and organizations so that public resources can be focused on areas of greatest need
Despair about entrenched problems	Hope that change is possible

From Peter L. Benson, *Uniting Communities for Youth* (Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute, 1995).

The Troubled Journey: A Portrait of 6th-12th Grade Youth and other Search Institute publications, present a framework 30 developmental assets—things that all young people need in their lives in order to thrive.³ (This framework of 30 assets has recently been expanded to 40. See Figure 3 for a list and description of the changes). Surveys of nearly 250,000 youth in 450 communities show that these developmental assets are building blocks that help young people make positive and healthy choices. Figure 4 on page 6 shows that the more assets young people have, the less likely they are to engage in problem behaviors, and the more likely they are to engage in positive, prosocial behaviors.



Figure 3
40 Developmental Assets

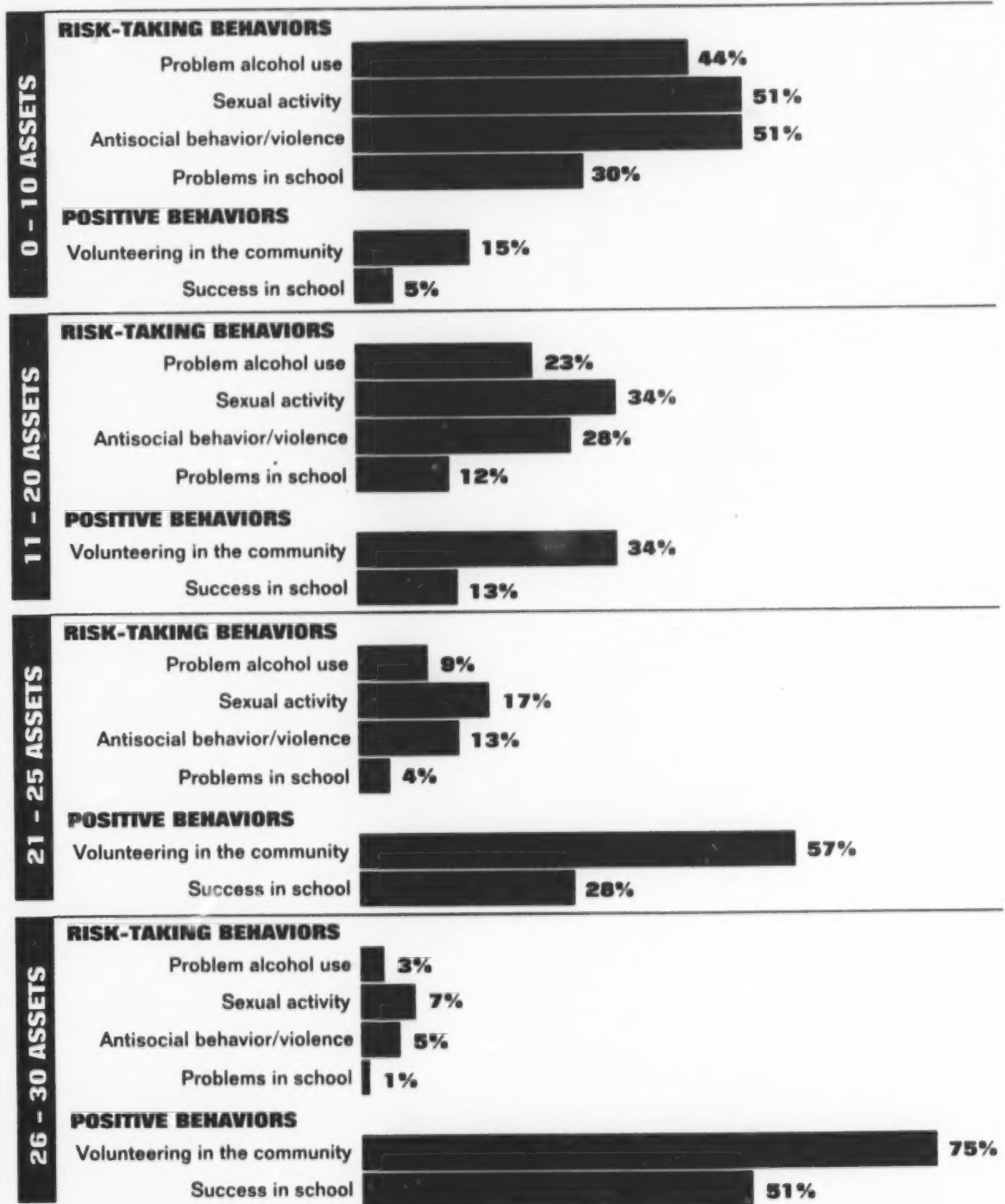
This chart lists 40 developmental assets that have been identified as forming a foundation for healthy development in adolescents. These 40 assets expand on a set of 30 assets that was first articulated in a 1990 report from Search Institute titled *The Troubled Journey: A Portrait of 6th-12th Grade Youth* and that undergird Search Institute's current asset-building resources. The new assets and asset types are shown in **bold type**. In addition, several of the original 30 assets have been revised, combined, or renamed.

ASSET TYPE	ASSET NAME AND DEFINITION
SUPPORT	1. Family support—Family life provides high levels of love and support. 2. Positive family communication—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek parent(s) advice and counsel. 3. Other adult relationships—Young person receives support from three or more non-parent adults. 4. Caring neighborhood—Young person experiences caring neighbors. 5. Caring school climate—School provides a caring, encouraging environment. 6. Parent involvement in schooling—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.
EMPOWERMENT	7. Community values youth—Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth. 8. Youth as resources—Young people are given useful roles in the community. 9. Service to others—Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week. 10. Safety—Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.
BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS	11. Family boundaries—Family has clear rules and consequences, and monitors the young person's whereabouts. 12. School boundaries—School provides clear rules and consequences. 13. Neighborhood boundaries—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior. 14. Adult role models—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior. 15. Positive peer influence—Young person's best friends model responsible behavior. 16. High expectations—Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.
CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME	17. Creative activities—Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts. 18. Youth programs—Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations. 19. Religious community—Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution. 20. Time at home—Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do," two or fewer nights per week.
COMMITMENT TO LEARNING	21. Achievement motivation—Young person is motivated to do well in school. 22. School engagement—Young person is actively engaged in learning. 23. Homework—Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day. 24. Bonding to school—Young person cares about her or his school. 25. Reading for pleasure—Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.
POSITIVE VALUES	26. Caring—Young person places high value on helping other people. 27. Equality and social justice—Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty. 28. Integrity—Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs. 29. Honesty—Young person tells the truth even when it is not easy. 30. Responsibility—Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility. 31. Restraint—Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
SOCIAL COMPETENCIES	32. Planning and decision-making—Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices. 33. Interpersonal competence—Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills. 34. Cultural competence—Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds. 35. Resistance skills—Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations. 36. Peaceful conflict resolution—Young person seeks to resolve conflict non-violently.
POSITIVE IDENTITY	37. Personal power—Young person feels he or she has control over "things that happen to me." 38. Self-esteem—Young person reports having a high self-esteem. 39. Sense of purpose—Young person reports that "my life has a purpose." 40. Positive view of personal future—Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

Figure 4
The Impact of Developmental Assets

Based on Search Institute's study of more than 250,000 youth across the nation, this chart shows that the more assets young people experience, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of risky behaviors. In addition, youth with more assets are more likely to grow up doing the positive things that society values.

Percent of Youth Engaged in Each Activity, by Number of Assets Reported





The asset-building approach demonstrates that supportive, empowering relationships with peers, parents, and other adults tend to protect youth from participating in high-risk behaviors. Places and opportunities also make a difference; young people who are involved in youth development programs and activities—whether at school, in agencies and community-based organizations, or religious settings—are less likely to be involved in high-risk behaviors. Furthermore, these settings provide opportunities to establish healthy, ongoing relationships with adults other than their parents as well as other youth who are involved with the program.

The asset-building approach is grounded in the literature on “risk and resiliency,” which has identified several factors that appear to protect young people from experiencing severe, long-term damage as a result of adverse conditions. Numerous studies have shown that one key factor in a young person’s resiliency is a supportive, mentoring relationship with a non-related adult, which can be a staff person from a youth development program.

A study of the entire island of Kauai in Hawaii characterized by poverty, alcoholism, and mental illness, found that young people who thrived despite these odds had the support of neighborhood mentors.⁴ Young people in dysfunctional settings who have one good relationship are also at lower risk of psychiatric disorder.⁵ Youth growing up in communities with high levels of poverty and crime may be particularly influenced by significant supportive adult relationships.⁶

The important distinction is the *quality* of the relationship. Even under the most adverse living conditions, relationships between children and adults, which are supportive, continuous, and of substantial intensity, can provide youth with the high expectations, attention, and guidance that they need to grow up healthy.





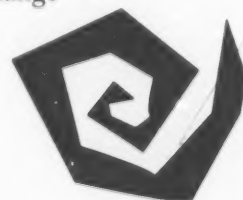
Effective Youth Development Programs

Given what is known from the risk-and-resiliency literature and Search Institute's asset-building model, the question emerges: What are the components of effective youth development programs that can positively impact the healthy development of young people? Youth development programs provide a critical context within a community, playing a role in shaping the lives of young people, and they provide an important resource that allows all young people to participate in society.⁷

There is a growing body of research that supports the value of participation in youth development programs. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development reports that these programs provide opportunities for young people to experience success, positive and meaningful relationships, a sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-identity, leadership skills, self-initiative, time management, and conflict resolution.⁸ In addition, young people say they want more programming to help them build personal and social skills. Youth say that this participation helps them develop prosocial skills. They also want access to community-based programs. Youth of color and youth in single-parent families particularly value these types of opportunities.⁹

Participation in targeted prevention programs as well as comprehensive youth development programs can lead to reduction in high-risk behaviors and promotion of prosocial behaviors.¹⁰

In some cases youth programming also plays an important role in meeting basic needs. For example, for some young people the food and relationships provided at programs far surpass anything they could get at home.¹¹ There are, of course, limits to how far a program can go to meet all of the needs of any young person. Youth development programs should not be expected to make up for generations of poverty, inadequate health care, housing, and unemployment. However, sustained and comprehensive interventions stand the best chance of effecting real change in the lives of disadvantaged youth.¹²



Critical Elements of Programming for Young People



A growing number of researchers have begun to synthesize research and evaluation studies in order to identify key ingredients for success in youth work and youth development programs. The following are 14 characteristics of effective programs, based on a compilation of the work of several different researchers:¹³

1. A focused and articulated vision
2. A broad spectrum of services and opportunities tailored to the needs and interests of young adolescents
3. Services and opportunities that recognize, value, and respond to the diverse backgrounds and experience that exist among young adolescents
4. Understanding youth in the context of the family
5. A supportive, flexible atmosphere for staff and volunteers
6. Collaboration with other community programs and outreach to families, schools, and other community partners in youth development
7. A supportive atmosphere for young people and caring relationships between staff/volunteers and young people
8. Youth workers who are committed and act as vigorous advocates for and with youth
9. Collective as well as individual efforts to extend the program reach to under-served populations
10. A feeling among young people that the staff/volunteers can be trusted, care about them, and respect them
11. A commitment to empowering young people which enhances their role as resources to their communities
12. Creative problem-solving, including working to stabilize funding bases and to adapt or circumvent traditional professional and bureaucratic limitations in order to meet the needs of clients
13. A solid organizational structure, including energetic and committed board leadership
14. Services that are coherent, easy to use, and offer continuity

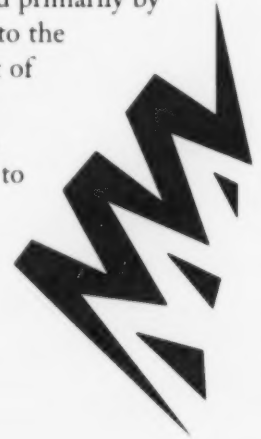
Several characteristics of successful youth workers have also been identified, including:

- A grounding in youth development principles (for example, attention to developmental differences of young people, value and respect for clientele)
- Genuine care and respect for youth and adult-youth relationships
- The skills to empower young people to be involved in the decision-making process
- Self-awareness and an understanding of program goals, strategies, and outcomes



Barriers to Youth Involvement in Programs

Young people who do not participate in any youth development programs may well be at greatest risk as they do not have the broad range of opportunities for building strengths and supportive relationships which programs can provide. Unfortunately, barriers exist that prevent young people—particularly low income youth—from participating in programs, regardless of the specific nature of the program or the fact that the program may meet many of their needs. A Search Institute study¹⁴ revealed that over half of youth in Minneapolis do not participate in any youth development programs. Factors which prevent youth participation require special attention. The top four barriers youth say keep them from participating are: no programs of interest are available, transportation problems, lack of knowledge about programs, and cost. Additionally, the mobility/dislocation experienced primarily by low-income families and families of color added to the perceived barriers. Parents also described the cost of programs, lack of knowledge, and transportation problems as barriers to their child's participation. Parents were also concerned about safety getting to and from an activity as a significant barrier to participation. These findings were particularly pronounced among low-income parents.



Impacts of Specific Program Types

Youth development programs around the country are facing an unprecedented call for accountability—documentation of the effectiveness of their programs. Yet fewer and fewer resources are being allocated for studying program design and impact. As one youth development expert, Michael Sherraden, says:

*"It would be difficult to overstate the problem. A researcher working in an urban area, for example, can more easily obtain a million dollars to study youth purse snatching than a thousand dollars to study youth theater and dance groups. This is a misallocation of research dollars. Unfortunately, it becomes a vicious circle—the more we study problems, the more we spend on problems; and the less we study solutions, the less we spend on solutions."*¹⁶

Two kinds of evidence are available that demonstrate the role of youth development programs in the lives of young people. One is theoretical—it examines the role, content, and strategies of programs in promoting the healthy development of young people. Secondly, recent research has demonstrated that program participation has a positive impact on youth outcomes. This type of research is a relatively new field of study, and thus our understanding of the findings is somewhat primitive. However, the following represents the "best" of what is now known about youth outcomes and, more globally, the findings related to self-esteem—the most commonly researched youth development outcome.

Sports and Recreation

From soccer to softball to Tai Kwon Do, recreational sports programs are some of the most common and popular programs for young people in the United States. Much of the research on these types of programs points to the positive nature of physical activity for health and well-being of youth of all ages. The benefits of different sports programs vary widely, from getting involved in shared activities, to opportunities for skill development, to relationships with other adults as well as peers.

A number of studies have demonstrated an increase in positive self concept as a result of improvement in sports skills for both boys and girls.¹⁷ Involvement in sports increases self-esteem in the domains of



"America's youth organizations rank second only to the public schools in the number of young people reached by their services each year, yet little is known about their current activities. Few studies have attempted to describe their programs and target populations, much less analyze the effectiveness of their efforts."¹⁸

While the impact of different types of sports programs vary, there are some things you can do to help ensure that your program will be a positive experience for the youth involved:

- 1. Recruit coaches and other leaders who have a positive attitude and support all the young people involved (not just those who are athletically gifted).**
- 2. Recognize that young people need a balance of sports involvement, school, family time, and other commitments. Schedule practices and competitions accordingly.**
- 3. Encourage parents to be involved and support their child's participation.**
- 4. Find ways to keep older youth involved, either as participants or leaders.**

athletic and scholastic competence, physical appearance, and global self-worth.¹⁸ Sports participation is especially important for special populations.¹⁹ For example, participation in Special Olympics is a powerful predictor of social competence among persons with mental retardation. The benefits of sports participation for all youth are closely related to the coach's assessments of ability, parental involvement, and the social aspects of sports participation. Parents need to recognize the importance of being supportive and involved, and coaches need training on how to develop positive self-esteem in young people as well as how to deal effectively with the wide range of abilities and participation styles.²⁰

Some studies have found that sports participation is related to success in school, particularly for females and athletes of color.²¹ Girls who participate in sports typically get higher grades than girls who don't participate.²² This has been found to be true for boys as well, except for boys who are the most active participants in sports and exercise. This may be because too much time spent on training interferes with studying. African-American and Hispanic athletes score higher on standardized achievement tests than non-athletes.²³ However, research in this area is mixed. Other studies have found no such relation between sports participation and academic achievement; instead, they have identified other variables associated with school, such as peer relationships and popularity, which are related to participation in sports activities. Athletic participation enhances popularity and contributes to greater involvement in extracurricular activities.²⁴ For example, athletes of color tend to be more active in school and community activities than non-athletes.²⁵

There have also been studies of the relation between sports and problem behaviors, although that relation is not always positive. For example, Jerry-Szpak and Brown studied the extent of adolescent athletes' alcohol use and found that only 14 percent of those surveyed reported that they were non-drinkers, and one-quarter had begun drinking between ages 10 and 13.²⁶ In addition, more males than females overall reported alcohol use, but female gymnasts appeared to have the highest percentage of alcohol use. Other studies suggest that structured physical fitness programs often have a favorable impact on some substance abuse risk factors and use patterns, but—despite an overall reduction in substance abuse—do not diminish alcohol consumption.²⁷ Involvement in sports also contributes to lower rates of smoking among boys.²⁸ In addition, sports and professional athlete role models can help deter juvenile delinquency.²⁹

The relation of sports and problem behaviors is complex. On the one hand, structured sports activities may help to diminish substance use

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and/or abuse. However, if the stress of sports competition is high, there might actually be an increase in substance use as a result of stress—as in the case of female gymnastics, which has received considerable public attention recently for the grueling practice and performance demands placed on young athletes. Sports programs should be designed mindful of young people's overall well-being and the importance of the attitudes of coaches and the relation between the coach/leader and the self-esteem and behavior choices of young people.



Camp Programs

Camp experiences can provide young people with valuable time with peers, other adults, as well as recreational activities often not possible in urban or even suburban environments. Camps can be particularly beneficial for young people with special needs such as chronic illness.¹⁰ These and other types of camps—such as wilderness or adventure camps¹¹—can increase competencies in a variety of areas, including:¹²

- Self-esteem
- Reduce recidivism of adjudicated youth¹³
- The development of realistic goal formation and overall well-being¹⁴
- Increase and improve skills related to self-care for young people with chronic illness¹⁵

The research focuses mostly on camping experiences for children and adolescents with special needs. Very little has been documented about the value of camp experiences for youth in general. There is somewhat more literature available on wilderness or Outward Bound-type experiences which points to increases in self-concept, but this is related to skill acquisition and mastery that often occurs in a camping experience.

Camping programs are some of the least studied youth development programs. However, one way camps clearly can make a difference is in developing specific areas of competence.

Youth Service

Youth community service and/or service-learning programs have received a lot of attention and federal funding in the past several years. Service programs have been difficult to study because they encompass an extraordinarily broad range of program designs and desired outcomes. Service-learning usually implies a program which uses youth service as a way to teach academic subject matter as well as enhance young people's service ethic (i.e., caring about and working to improve one's community). Service-learning programs often try to build other skills in youth as well, including: leadership (for example, planning and implementing projects, initiative- or risk-taking, problem-solving), self-esteem and self-efficacy (a sense of being able to make a difference), and

Built in reflection time and activities are key to service programs that work. Other important factors include:

- Involving youth as leaders in the program and within specific activities
- Giving youth hands-on learning experiences
- Focusing on relationship building
- Giving youth a say in decisions made throughout planning, implementation, and reflection

teamwork. Youth community service projects generally have much the same desired youth outcomes as those of a service-learning program, but without the focus on academic achievement. Involvement in service—especially service-learning—has been found to have a variety of positive outcomes, including:

- Improvement in academic learning³⁶
- Consistent gains in factual knowledge related to the actual experience³⁷
- Increased problem-solving ability³⁸
- A positive influence on social development and maturity (for example, a sense of social responsibility, political efficacy)³⁹
- Enhanced psychological development (for example, self-esteem, ego development, self-efficacy)⁴⁰
- Growth in the development of leadership ability⁴¹
- Ability to make friends⁴²
- Significant changes in educational attainment (for example, higher graduation rate, career aspirations, employment)⁴³

Thus, there is substantial evidence that service has a positive impact on young people's development. When combined, qualitative and quantitative research support the use of these types of youth programs as tools in promoting intellectual, social, and psychological outcomes. Research has clearly demonstrated that these types of programs can have positive effects on academic success as a result of "hands-on" experiential effects, as well as helping to build self-esteem, feelings of self-efficacy, leadership skills, interactions with others, and promoting an overall decrease in problem behaviors.

Mentoring

When done well, mentoring programs can have a powerful, positive impact on both the adults and young people involved. Three "best practices" of mentoring programs are:

1. A firm commitment from the young people and adults involved
2. High quality training for mentors
3. Ongoing support and monitoring of the relationships between youth and their mentors

The concept of mentoring—pairing novices with those who have more experience—is not new. However, various types of mentoring have recently been renewed and championed in the United States. In the 1970s, corporate mentoring and apprenticeship programs enjoyed much attention as an intentional strategy to develop effective managers in business settings. During the 1980s mentoring became an increasingly popular strategy for working with disadvantaged youth.⁴⁴ More recently, people who work with and study young people have been recognizing the importance of all young people having a supportive, caring mentor in their lives.

The newer forms of mentoring mark an important transition from naturally occurring and informal mentoring (occurring at home or within one's school, community, or work place) to more formal, instrumental mentoring. With a mobile, age-segregated, and highly specialized society, the number of naturally occurring mentors have

decreased leaving youth with fewer sustained, caring, and helpful relationships with adults. This decrease in naturally occurring adult mentors increases the need for formal mentoring programs.⁴⁵

Formal mentoring may take different shapes (for example, traditional, one-to-one, friendship-oriented relationships; career mentors; tutors who focus both on academic and personal support). Mentoring may be one strategy among many in a given program, or an entire program may be designed exclusively around mentoring relationships.

The research findings on the benefits of mentoring are mixed. Success rates (measured by the development of a sustained relationship) of formal youth/adult mentoring relationships are sometimes low, below 50 percent. However, when done well, mentoring can work. For example, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) recently released a study of adolescent applicants to Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring programs.⁴⁶ Half of the young people studied were paired with adult mentors; the other half were put on a waiting list. In a follow-up 18 months later, those who had received mentors were less likely to have started using substances, less likely to be aggressive, improved their school attendance and performance, and demonstrated improved peer and family relationships.

Another study linked at-risk African-American male students with supportive African-American adult-male role models.⁴⁷ More than three-quarters of the participants maintained or improved their conduct and met weekly school performance goals. Almost all improved their school attendance and more than half maintained or improved their academic performance. However, it is important to be cautious in jumping to conclusions about the outcomes of all mentoring programs based on the studies of just a few. For example, findings from another study that examined the effects of participation in a mentoring program on African-American adolescents show no significant effects on global self-esteem or grade point average.⁴⁸

As a strategy to enhance the well-being of all young people, including disadvantaged youth, mentoring requires time and effort on the part of program providers, mentors, and youth being mentored. In addition, comprehensive, effective mentoring programs require training of, and ongoing support and attention to, the relationships of young people and their mentors. Recognizing these constraints, when done well, mentoring can work as a powerful strategy to enhance the well being of young people.

Drop-In Centers

Services offered by youth drop-in centers run the gamut from crisis counseling, to a safe place for positive peer interaction, to health care or contraceptive services. These are places where young people meet socially



Drop-in centers are clearly most frequented when adolescents like to be there. Here are some things drop-in centers can do to make sure they "get used":

- **Design the center to be informal and physically comfortable.**
- **Make sure it is a place where young people feel safe and welcome.**
- **Encourage lots of peer-to-peer interaction and support.**

School-to-work and other job-readiness programs can take several steps to help ensure success:

- 1. Provide opportunities for youth to interact with adults in actual work settings.**
- 2. Incorporate training and teaching with on-the-job learning experiences.**
- 3. Focus on the present realities in young peoples' lives, as well as on long-term career and life goals.**

and, in some cases, find a safe haven. The available literature points to the importance of these types of informal community structures and supports. Adolescents feel they can rely on them for services and feel more comfortable in these settings than in formal community settings, particularly if these services are nearby.⁴⁹

There is very little outcome research specifically related to drop-in or teen centers. Some studies have shown that teen centers can have a number of different positive outcomes. One group of researchers found that the peer support and connection that youth experience in these centers can prevent or reduce substance abuse, school failure, and other problem behaviors.⁵⁰ Drop in centers can be good for the neighborhood, as well. Researchers studying the impact of the presence of a Boys and Girls Club in a housing development project found an overall reduction in substance abuse, drug trafficking, and other drug-related criminal activity in the community.⁵¹ Drop-in centers may also benefit youth with mental illness who may not otherwise receive proper care; research has shown that disturbed adolescents seek help from teen centers more often than nondisturbed adolescents.⁵²

Jobs, Career Planning, and School-to-Work Transitions

This century has marked the extension of education beyond secondary school in almost all Western societies.⁵³ It is often assumed that these educational gains carry with them advantages in terms of employment. This is certainly the case for some people. However, at the same time there has been a reduction in unskilled jobs⁵⁴ and an increase in the educational qualifications for many jobs.⁵⁵ The transition for many young people who don't want or don't have access to post-secondary education has not been from school to work, but from school to unemployment.⁵⁶

The research on school-to-work transitions has demonstrated the usefulness of employment or apprenticeships for youth. This is true particularly in research from European countries where there are many more effective apprenticeship opportunities than in the United States. For example, the former Federal Republic of Germany has been quite successful at keeping youth unemployment low by offering programs that incorporate education and on-the-job training.⁵⁷

The existing research shows that programs that offer youth opportunities to work and interact with adults in professional settings can contribute to positive outcomes including, life/career studies, entrepreneurial skills, environmental study, and the study of arts in the

marketplace.⁵⁸ Furthermore, they influence not only the type of career that young people may choose later in life, but also positively influence current self-confidence and attitudes.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, not only are apprenticeships rare in the United States, young people have very few opportunities to even interact with adults who are performing work roles.⁶⁰

Support Programs for Teen Parents

A number of programs have been developed that focus on improving the parenting skills of teen parents, and supporting them in continuing their education.⁶² These types of programs consistently report short-term gains in maternal and infant health and knowledge of child development,⁶³ and longer-term effects in school completion and employment.⁶⁴ One program that combined mentoring with teen parenting paired teen parents with women in the community who served as mentors, role models, and friends.⁶⁵ After five years, the teens in the program were more likely than the comparison group to be employed, have better parenting skills, and their children had cognitive gains and fewer behavioral problems. While less than half had obtained a high school diploma, half were receiving AFDC, and only one-third were working, these are more positive outcomes than those teen parents who were not involved in the program.

Another program that provided parenting and child development skills, health care, and assistance with practical life problems to 335 extremely disadvantaged teenagers, found an increase in the number of clients using birth control, though no decrease in the number of repeat pregnancies.⁶⁶ Another comprehensive program that provided prenatal and family planning to adolescents reported less maternal and infant morbidity, increased school attendance and graduation, and increases in employment and contraceptive use.⁶⁷

Researchers say that teen parent programs that are the most effective have the following components:⁶¹

- A full range of comprehensive services under one roof
- Long-term support for clients
- Assertive outreach that encourages participation
- Involvement of partners and other family members
- A staff that can offer strong emotional support
- An integration of pregnancy prevention into the program



Figure 5
Potential Program Outcomes and Keys to Success

Most youth development programs—if well planned, organized, and staffed—have the potential for some positive outcomes for the young people involved. Here is some of what the research says about possible positive outcomes and keys to success for different types of programs.

PROGRAM TYPE	POTENTIAL POSITIVE OUTCOMES	KEYS TO SUCCESS
SPORTS AND RECREATION	• Improved physical health • Better self-concept • More interest in extracurricular and community activities in general • Success in school • Decreases in substance use	• A coach/leader with a positive, supportive attitude • Balancing sports involvement with school, family, and other commitments • Parental involvement and support • Encouraging older teens to stay involved; athletic participation declines among older adolescents
CAMPS	• Increased self-esteem • Development of specific skills • Reduction of recidivism of adjudicated youth • Ability to set realistic goals • Improved self-care among youth with chronic illness	• Focus on specific areas of development (e.g., self-care, skill development)
SERVICE	• Academic improvement • Commitment to service • Problem-solving skills • Increased social and psychological development • Decreased problem behaviors • Leadership development • Self-confidence • Career exploration • Positive relationships with peers and adults	• Youth leadership within program and/or specific activities • Focus on hands-on learning opportunities • Design programs with relationship building in mind • Engage youth in decision-making during all phases of the program (planning, implementation, reflection)
MENTORING	• Decreased alcohol and other drug use • Reduced violent behavior • Success in school • Improved relationships with other adults and peers	• Require a strong commitment from mentors (at least one year, 12 hours per month) • Provide training and ongoing support for mentors
DROP-IN CENTERS	• Reduced use of alcohol and other drugs • Can be places where youth feel comfortable seeking advice and/or support from adults	• Design center to be comfortable, informal, and relationship focused
SCHOOL-TO-WORK	• Career exploration • Decrease in overall youth unemployment • Opportunities to interact with adult role models • Improved self confidence	• Provide opportunities for youth to interact with adults in work settings • Incorporate education with on-the job-training • Focus on present as well as long-term career goals
SUPPORT FOR TEEN PARENTS	• Developing parenting skills • Increased use of birth control • Increased employment • Improved health and development of mother and child • Commitment to continuing education	• Offer a full-range of health and support services • Provide ongoing, long-term support for clients • Encourage involvement partners and other family members • Integrate pregnancy prevention into program



Self-Esteem as a Specific Program Goal

A positive sense of self is an essential component of healthy development during childhood and adolescence.⁶⁸ Self-esteem is perhaps the single-most commonly cited youth outcome goal across virtually all types of youth development programs. In general, providing opportunities for young people to be involved in positive relationships, develop life skills, to contribute to their communities, and to be part of a group, enhances their feelings of self-esteem.⁶⁹

However, self-esteem is not as simple a concept as it may seem on the surface. It involves young people's perceptions of their abilities or strengths in a number of different areas such as physical attractiveness, academic competence, peer relationships, athletic competence, and general behavior.⁷⁰ For most youth, self-esteem—like other areas of development—follows a positive trajectory, increasing over the course of adolescence. Self-esteem in certain areas is closely related to physical development. For example, some researchers have found that the timing of puberty in girls impacts their body images⁷¹ and self esteem in general.⁷²

Given the importance of self-esteem to healthy development, it is not surprising that increasing self-esteem is a common goal across many youth development programs. However, self-esteem is a very stable dimension of the personality—it is difficult to change or impact self-esteem, particularly through one program or intervention. An increase in a particular area of self-esteem (e.g., peer relationships, academic achievement) may occur in programs that are intensive and involve activities specifically designed to increase that particular facet of self-esteem. While opportunities for young people to be successful and feel good about themselves can and do augment particular domains of self-esteem, few programs can impact global self-esteem, unless they are unusually intensive and comprehensive.

Many studies reveal positive outcomes for young people with behavioral and emotional problems who are involved in youth programs.⁷³ However, it is important to recognize that while some general factors—such as degree of participation, and staff training and supervision—have an impact, there are developmental factors which interact with program factors to impact youth outcomes.

Thus, caution should be exercised in designing programs or describing program goals in terms of global self-esteem; program providers should be clear about the particular area of self-esteem that they are trying to impact and should use or develop instrumentation to measure that particular area of self-esteem. Such increases in self-esteem are difficult to measure; the assessment tool must be carefully designed to match the particular aspect or domain of self-esteem which is being addressed by program activities.





Addressing Youth Development Program Accountability Needs: Alternatives and Recommendations

Youth development programs today are in a difficult position as they experience major shifts in funding, increased calls for accountability in outcomes, and a major but uneven shift in paradigms from intervention and prevention toward a broader, positive youth development approach. These shifts, and the very nature of many youth development programs and activities, make it very difficult to fully meet accountability criteria.

Alternative Approaches to Accountability

Given the current picture, programs and local organizations have basically four options for justifying their program's impact on youth outcomes. The success of each of these approaches depends on the support of and interaction with key stakeholders (funders, public policy officials, staff, boards of directors, and others).

Outcome Study—Program staff can directly, or through an external evaluator, conduct an outcome study of the program. Such studies are often difficult and expensive to design, implement, and complete. They are not recommended unless the program has clearly stated, realistic outcomes and is intensive enough to demonstrate impact on those outcomes within the timeframe of the program. These studies may be more expensive than is feasible or appropriate (taking 10 to 20 percent of current program budgets) for a local organization whose resources need to be invested in programming. When done well, however, an evaluation of this type is the most convincing way to address accountability issues, but it is seldom affordable and often not appropriate.

Comparisons to Previous Studies—Program providers can sometimes justify their impact by comparing their programs with studies by others that demonstrate the impact of similar programs, like those reviewed here. The stronger the support of the research, the stronger the case that can be made—and the smaller the need for new evaluation. In other words,

program providers don't always need to "re-invent the wheel," if they can demonstrate that their program has similar characteristics (for example, intensity, training, quality staff) to those already studied. The major difficulty with this comparison approach is that there are few areas where funders and program providers agree there is a solid base of studies that "prove" impact.

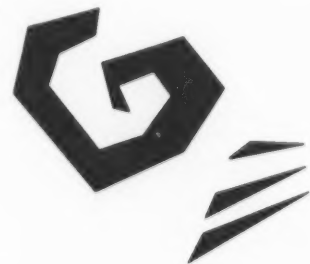
Establish Theoretical Foundation—A program can be tied to a theoretical approach or perspective that is widely understood by relevant stakeholders. For example, if funders and public policy officials embrace asset building or a similar youth development framework, then the case for value or impact can be made on conceptual or theoretical grounds. This approach relies on stakeholders "buying in" to the theory and program providers being able to clearly articulate how the program goals and objectives are tied to the theory. This approach will gain the support of fellow believers, but not skeptics. It is better seen as a "first step" in documenting impact and it can be effectively followed by research demonstrating impact. Hence, such an approach leads back to the first approach—an outcome study.

Integrated Approach—This approach integrates elements of the first three approaches. It includes:

- 1) a conceptual or theoretical framework about what works;
- 2) a study or series of studies that show that the framework is related to key desired outcome; and
- 3) a set of tools or measures that assess key dimensions of a program.

For example, Search Institute is working with the YMCA of the USA to develop tools that link YMCA programming efforts to the research that supports asset building. This comprehensive strategy provides a way to systematically gather information that fits within a framework used to develop or inform the program, and it capitalizes on the research that has already been done in creating that framework. Since the tools measure indicators that are consistent with key concepts of the framework, each individual program does not have to do as complete an outcome evaluation in order to demonstrate impact.

While an integrated approach does not demonstrate impact or desired outcomes as directly as a formal, program-specific experiment, it provides much of the essential information needed by both program developers and funders, and it does so less expensively and in a way that is more likely to strengthen programming efforts.





Recommendations

There is a critical need to increase the level and amount of research done on the outcomes of youth development programs. Funders who are serious about wanting evidence of impact need to be willing to also fund evaluation efforts at a level which will permit intensive program evaluations. In most cases this means investing 10 to 20 percent of the program budget in addition to—not as a replacement for—program funding.

In addition, funders of youth development programs—private and public, local and national—should work together to coordinate their funding strategies in order to design and implement a comprehensive research agenda. This research agenda should focus on what makes youth development programs work, with relatively less emphasis on what doesn't work.

Together funders and youth development program staff can establish a clear set of desired program outcomes that are realistic, measurable within typical funding constraints, and that guide program development. Realistic and appropriate evaluation protocols, parameters and assessment processes, and evaluation tools must be developed. Funders need to support the development of appropriate measurement tools that are consistent with the developmental needs of young people, the philosophy of positive youth development, and the realities of youth programming. Where possible, materials that are prepackaged will help make evaluation efforts easier and programs more effective. But they must be thoroughly and accurately explained, and allow for the creativity and involvement of local staff and youth as well.

It is time for a move away from overly elaborate demonstration projects that have little likelihood of being fully implemented. What's needed is an approach that includes a demonstration phase which documents impact, and also has sustainable funding. Funders and national organizations can work together to both stimulate and identify promising programs which have the potential for meeting key needs and which can be replicated. Such programs should be encouraged to develop materials for both expanded implementation and intensive evaluation. Furthermore, to the extent possible, findings of intensive evaluations should be widely communicated so that new sites do not need to repeat the intensive investment in evaluation.

Local Programs

Local youth development programs should rethink their approaches to program development, funding, and evaluation, including:

- Working to explicitly state goals and objectives that can reasonably be expected to occur.
- Tying goals to a framework, ideally one that focuses on positive youth development.
- Getting involved in efforts to help funders develop an acceptable, common set of outcomes for programs that they will support.
- Encouraging staff to seek training in program development and the role of evaluation in a way that is consistent with current realities. (This may include special training through the national offices or the development of a partnership with local organizations or colleges and universities that work in these areas.)
- Developing an explicit approach to accountability for youth outcomes which recognizes the costs and benefits of the alternative approaches.

Program providers can encourage funders to adopt a positive youth development framework rather than a strictly problem-focused approach by working to educate funders and administrators about how youth activities both build youth assets and meet developmental needs and how youth with such assets are less likely to be involved in at-risk behavior. Program providers and funders can then work together to develop realistic and appropriate evaluation protocols, parameters, and assessment processes and tools.

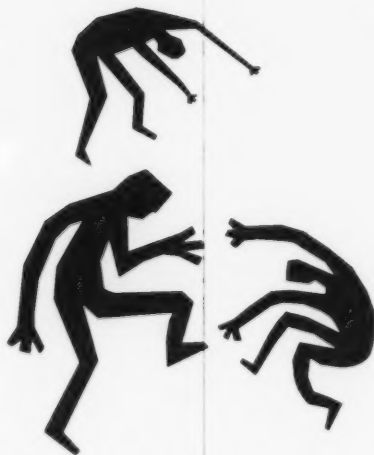
National Organizations

National youth-serving organizations need a new role and focus for evaluation in their often decentralized and extensive systems. Much of this work is already underway in many different organizations. Based on this report we offer national organizations the following recommendations:

- Support the development of appropriate measurement tools that are consistent with the developmental needs of youth, the philosophy of positive youth development, and the realities of youth programs.
- Provide sufficient and quality information about the utility, necessity, and methods of evaluation in any training of program development staff. Training should reflect the emerging positive youth development framework, communicate the realities surrounding accountability, and assist in clarifying program goals and outcomes that are linked to evaluation efforts. Explanations of formative and summative evaluations should be included (for example, sufficient program intensity, duration and frequency, match between program activities and desired outcomes, realistic program goals).
- Identify and stimulate promising programs which have the potential for meeting key needs, and which can be replicated. Encourage these programs to develop materials for both expanded

implementation as well as intensive evaluation. To the extent possible, intensive evaluations should be conducted and, most importantly, clearly communicated to ensure that new sites do not need to repeat the intensive investment in evaluation.

- Individually and cooperatively prepare syntheses of research and evaluation work on various program types (similar to those presented here), which can be made directly useful to local programs for work with funders and administrators.
- Train and provide resources to program providers that draw on studies of program effectiveness so they can learn from other similar programs and increase their own positive impact.



Conclusion

Accountability is essential to the long-term viability of any youth development program and is a critical piece in the foundation upon which a public policy agenda for expanding youth development programs is built. Given the important role that evaluation can play in the success of a particular program, several questions should be considered in developing an evaluation plan: Is the program ready for a summative evaluation or a large scale research study? Are the goals realistic and clearly stated? Is the program stable (for example, has it been around for several years, is it going through modifications or staff changes)? Do reasonable measures exist? Is it probable that the program components or activities will impact the desired outcomes? Is the program of adequate duration, intensity and frequency to have impact on stated outcomes?

In addition to accountability, evaluation provides the information that providers need to strengthen their own programs and share what they have learned with colleagues. Until programs are examined in more depth, providers risk investing time and resources in areas that have little impact, while neglecting important factors in success.

Youth programs that serve to meet young people's key developmental needs in real and concrete ways do have a positive impact on youth. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders—funders, policy makers, program providers, and others—to continue the work of evaluating youth development program outcomes, and investigating strategies for holding programs accountable in appropriate and realistic ways. Most importantly, we need to ensure that young people's access to quality programs where they learn new skills, develop important competencies, and establish healthy, supportive relationships with peers and adults, is not limited by unrealistic, unreasonable, or unattainable standards of accountability.





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Additional Search Institute Resources and Practical Tools

Youth Programs

Places to Grow

Perspectives on Youth Development Opportunities for 7-to 14-Year-Old Minneapolis Youth

A useful model for other communities this 1995 report focuses on Minneapolis youth from ages 7 to 14, answering questions such as: What types of youth development programs are available? Where are these opportunities located? What percent of youth are involved in constructive youth programs and what are they? Most importantly, it addresses the question of what can be done to ensure that the young people who need it most participate in programs that build assets.

#336 full report \$14.95

#335 study highlights \$4.50

Understanding Mentoring Relationships

This study presents a typology of mentoring that includes traditional mentoring programs, long-term focused activity, short-term focused activity, team mentoring, and group mentoring.

#316 \$8.00

3:00 to 6:00 P.M. Resource Series

Planning Programs for Young Adolescents

By Gayle Dorman

This comprehensive program planning assessment and staff development curriculum helps youth-serving professionals design and implement programs that work for young adolescents. Though this curriculum was first developed in 1985, the needs and strategies remain relevant in light of ongoing concerns about a lack of constructive outside-of-school activities for young adolescents. Purchase of curriculum includes a complete planning guide; a participant notebook; Programs for Young Adolescents, a catalog of highly-effective, models of out-of-school programming; and Understanding Early Adolescence: A Framework.

#719 \$150

Planning Programs for Young Adolescents training is highly recommended for use with this curriculum. Call Search Institute's training coordinator at 1-800-888-7828 for details.

Programs for Young Adolescents

By Leah M. Lefstein and Dr. Joan Lipsitz

This program catalog describes 27 examples of highly effective models of out-of-school programming for young adolescents.

#716 \$10.00

Young Adolescents at Home and in the Community

By Leah M. Lefstein, William Kerewsky, Elliot A. Medrib, and Carol Frank

This classic book examines the issues surrounding after-school care for young adolescents through a series of essays on the need for programs and services that respond to the developmental issues facing young adolescents. It includes recommendations for developing effective after-school programs.

#714 \$7.00

Asset Awareness Resources

The Troubled Journey

A Portrait of 6th-12th Grade Youth

By Dr. Peter L. Benson

This in-depth, groundbreaking study provides the research framework for an asset-promoting approach. It proposes a vision for positive youth development, defines the construct of developmental assets, and demonstrates their protective consequences.

#308 \$10.00

Building Assets Together

101 Group Activities for Helping Youth Succeed

By Jolene L. Roehlkepartain

This book gives creative, easy-to-use activities to introduce developmental assets to youth. It includes 70 interactive group activities for 6th to 12th graders and 31 attractive, photocopiable worksheets that help youth understand and build their own assets.

#333 \$18.95

For a catalog of additional resources, call 1-800-888-7828.



About Search Institute

Search Institute is a non-sectarian, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the positive development of children and adolescents by conducting scientific research and translating the findings into practical programs, products, and services for educators, youth workers, parents, policy makers, and others. In 1995, the resources and services of the University of North Carolina's Center for Early Adolescence were integrated into Search Institute.

About The YMCA

The YMCA of the USA is the U.S. YMCA movement's national office, serving more than 2,000 autonomous YMCAs nationwide. These volunteer-led YMCAs serve their communities by meeting local health and social service needs. All program and management decisions are made locally. YMCAs provide values-based programs and experiences that nurture the healthy development of children, support families, and strengthen communities.

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